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ABSTRACT

Recent historical events have made it increasingly important to strengthen the study of Western Europe in U.S. schools. With full integration of the European Community after 1992, with the unification of the two Germanys, and with the newly democratic states of the old Soviet bloc seeking some form of association with the European Economic Community, Western Europe will inevitably continue to affect our lives in significant ways. And yet the speed and complexity of the changes that are taking place make it difficult for educators to gain access to recent relevant information and to develop coherent teaching programs about Western European affairs. This ERIC Digest (1) discusses why students should learn about Western Europe; (2) suggests where Western European studies belong in the curriculum; (3) outlines strategies for teaching the subject; and (4) lists a selection of key sources of information. (Author/DB)

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Teaching about Western Europe

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Recent events have made it increasingly urgent to strengthen the study of Western Europe in American schools. With full integration of the European Community after 1992, with the unification of the two Germanys, and with the newly democratic states of the old Soviet bloc seeking some form of association with the European Economic Community (EEC), Western Europe will inevitably continue to affect our lives in significant ways. And yet the speed and complexity of the changes that are taking place make it difficult for educators to gain access to recent relevant information and to develop coherent teaching programs about West European affairs. This ERIC Digest (1) discusses why students should learn about Western Europe, (2) suggests where West European studies belongs in the curriculum, (3) outlines some strategies for teaching the subject, and (4) lists a selection of key sources of information.

Why Students Should Learn about Western Europe. The fact that the United States is a multi-ethnic society has already led to development of educational programs dealing with ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism. In this respect area studies, generally, have a significant contribution to make, but the study of Western Europe is important for a number of very specific reasons.

The European Economic Community (the EEC) has emerged as a major political and economic power. With a population of 325 million and a GNP of $4 trillion, the EEC represents the largest market and most powerful industrial force in the world. If Western Europe joins forces with the newly liberated democracies of Eastern Europe, the results will be staggering. The old dream of a united Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals may become a reality.

Western Europe, however, is much more than a modern political entity. It is wider and older than the EEC. It is the product of Greek culture and Roman law, the heartland of Christianity, the birthplace of modern science, and the crucible of political liberalism, all of which form the foundation of the American way of life. Although in recent years the focus of American agendas has shifted to other areas of the world, the fact remains that many of the basic principles of our political and social systems originated in Western Europe.

It has often been stated that some of our foreign policy problems spring from a lack of understanding of other societies, and how they are changing. While today the East and the South present challenges and opportunities of their own, world diplomacy and international relations as a whole remain rooted in the traditions of Western Europe. The training of tomorrow's leaders must include a knowledge of that area's history, culture, and political and economic systems.

Economic, strategic, and cultural ties of the United States to Western Europe are probably more important than ties to any other part of the world. Yet this key world area has been taken for granted to the point of neglect. While studies of ethnic and minority groups in the United States are important, it is at least equally important for young Americans to understand something about the traditions of Western constitutional democracy from which our country springs.

The Place of West European Studies in the Curriculum. The serious and organized study of Western Europe is usually not undertaken before the secondary school grades, and there are good reasons for this. However, it would be valuable and relatively easy to spread it across the curriculum in the elementary grades—not in the formal sense of "writing across the curriculum" programs, but by giving it increased emphasis in subject areas such as history, geography, economics, social studies, languages, and religious studies. Indeed, many educators have found it quite natural to do so, rather in the way that Monsieur Jourdain spoke "prose" without realizing it.

Despite the urgent need to address the very real concerns of today's minorities, the development of the United States has been so closely related to the fortunes of Western Europe that it is almost impossible to keep the subject out of the curriculum. The notion of independence is a key component of American tradition, but many of our political and cultural institutions mirror those of "the old country." Elements of Western civilization emerge in any consideration of American art, literature, and thought. The historical study of almost any American phenomenon requires at least a look at the West European background against which it emerged.

Until the very end of the 19th century, the vast majority of the immigrants arriving in the United States came essentially from Western Europe. Thus the European experience is part of the very fabric of culture in the United States. Sadly, much of the linguistic wealth of the immigrants was lost in the melting pot, but today language teaching is as vigorous as it has ever been, and many modern languages taught in our schools have their roots in Western Europe.

In geography, economics, and history, Western Europe offers a breadth and variety of different social, political, industrial, financial, and legal systems that can be explored as individual cases or as comparative entities or, again, as parts of a cohesive whole. Looking backwards, Western Europe can be viewed as a sum of knowledge and experience. Looking forward, it can provide indicators for future trends in our own country. Its study, therefore, has immediate relevance to a great many teaching areas.

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Strategies for Teaching about Western Europe. The simplest strategy, without adopting a formal curriculum, is to identify West European perspectives in teaching various subjects in the social studies. For example, when teaching about Shakespeare or Galileo or Columbus, there is a tendency to treat them as discrete topics within literature, science, or exploration in history. But to situate such figures in a broader West European context is to help students to make the intellectual connections without which a full understanding of the subject is impossible.

Conversely, another important strategy is to recognize that there is no such thing as a single European value system or a uniform European lifestyle. Western Europe is a collection of individual cultures, languages, and peoples, which happen to be held together by common political and economic objectives. The essence of Western Europe is its diversity. This is a concept that needs to be emphasized for American students who live in a multiethnic but politically unified nation-state, which extends territorially from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and beyond.

A third strategy is to make students aware of the interdependence of Americans and Europeans, and the potential impact that West European events can have on people and institutions in the United States. The concept of interdependence is an essential element of social studies education, and it can be illustrated by studies of the interactions of Western European nation-states and the European Economic Community, as well as their relationships with the United States.

Finally, on a more practical note, Western Europe can be studied through the media: newspapers, magazines, and radio and television. The media coverage of contemporary events is so intense that students are able to feel that they are watching history in the making. This sense of immediacy can bring excitement to any class of social studies students.

Useful Sources of Information about Western Europe. The chief difficulty of teaching about Western Europe as a modern political and economic entity is where to obtain concise and up-to-date information. The best single source is the Delegation of the Commission of the European Community, 2100 M Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037. Write for SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND DOCUMENTS ON THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY, which lists publications, depository libraries, and details of databases and free audiovisual resources.

Other useful sources are the West European National Resource Centers located at the following Universities:

- University of California-Berkeley. 415-642-2273.
- Columbia University, New York, NY. 212-854-5400.
- Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. 812-855-3280 or 855-0036.
- C.U.N.Y., New York, NY. 212-790-4442.
- Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI. 616-383-8522.
- Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. 607-255-7592.

And, of course, for contemporary affairs, an obvious but much neglected resource is THE ECONOMIST. This magazine can be ordered from the Subscription Department, P.O. Box 904, Farmingdale, NY 11737-9804.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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